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ABSTRACT

This study examines the sex differences in preschool children's perception of male and female adults of different ages (young, middle-aged and elderly) and the degree to which physical attractiveness plays a role in children's attributions concerning adults. Forty 3- and 4-year-old children (20 boys, 20 girls) from middle-income families served as subjects. The children individually responded to a modified Children's Attitudes Toward the Elderly Scale (CATE), which required them to order pictures of men and women by age. The addition of an attractiveness question (pretty/handsome vs. ugly) was the primary modification to the CATE. The children correctly ordered younger, middle-aged, and elderly female adults by age, but did not differentiate younger and middle-aged male adults by age. They always viewed an elderly male adult as oldest. Boys were generally less positive than girls in attitudes toward elderly individuals and boys also tended to view the elderly adults as less physically attractive than younger adults. These results suggest that negative attributions concerning elderly persons are evident as early as the preschool years. (Author/JA)

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SEX DIFFERENCES IN PRESCHOOLERS' PERCEPTIONS OF YOUNG, MIDDLE-AGED AND ELDERLY ADULTS

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SUMMARY

The Children's Attitudes Toward the Elderly Scale (CATE) was administered in modified form to 40 preschool boys and girls. Children were able to correctly order younger, middle-aged and elderly female adults by age, but did not differentiate younger and middle-aged male adults by age. An elderly male adult was always viewed as oldest by the children, however. Boys were generally less positive than girls in attitudes toward elderly individuals and boys also tended to view the elderly adults as less physically attractive than younger adults. Implications of the results for additional research are explored.

A. INTRODUCTION

Previous research concerning attitudes toward the elderly indicates that older persons are viewed as sick, forgetful, helpless, etc., by children, adolescents, adults, and the elderly themselves (e.g.1,2,4,5). Apparently, children are especially critical of older persons and give a few positive attributes regarding becoming old themselves (e.g. 4). This study examined three issues in preschoolers' attitudes toward the elderly. First, we sought to replicate previous work (4) which initially revealed preschoolers' attitudes toward young, middle-aged, and elderly adults. Second, we examined sex differences in children's responses to male and female adults. Finally, we studied the degree to which physical attractiveness played a role in children's attributions of adults.

B. METHOD

Forty preschoolers (20 boys, 20 girls; M age 3.9 years, range = 3.1 -4.4) served as subjects. All children were white, from middle-income homes, and were recruited from a large private preschool in Fargo, North Dakota. While IQ information was not available, teachers' judgments suggested that all of the children were of average intelligence levels.

Children individually responded to a modified Children's Attitudes Toward the Elderly Scale (CATE) (4)[2]. The CATE requires children to order (by age) pictures of young, middle-aged and elderly men and women. Further, children are asked to make forced-choice attributions of the young and elderly adults. The primary modification to the CATE included an attractiveness question (pretty/handsome vs. ugly). Color photographs (4" x 4") were taken of six male and female adults who were classified as younger (ages 20, 21), middle-aged (40, 42) or elderly (ages 61, 62). All

photos were taken using a standard, white background and photos were cropped at chin levels to eliminate clothing cues. All facial expressions among the adults were neutral.

C. RESULTS

Analyses of the percentages of children making particular types of responses indicated that while children correctly ordered female adults by age (97.5%), the young and middle-aged male adults were not viewed as different in age (i.e. 55% saw the younger male adult as the youngest while 45% believed the middle-aged male adult was the youngest). However, both the younger and middle-aged male adults were judged younger than the elderly male adult by 100% of the children.

At least 75% of boys described both young and elderly, male and female adults as helpful, friendly, happy, clean and glad. However, boys were more likely to view the younger adults as healthy (85.0%), physically attractive (90.0%) and good (95.0%) while attributing these characteristics to elderly adults less often (healthy, 45.0%; attractive, 35.0%, good, 55.0%). No clear differences as a function of the sex of adults emerged among boys' attributes.

Surprisingly, girls saw no differences between younger and elderly adults on any of the following: health, friendliness, physical attractiveness, being good and happiness (range of percentages = 75.0% - 100.0%). Girls did view the younger adults as more helpful (75.0%) than the elderly adults (45.0%), but viewed the elderly adults as happier (80.0% vs. 50.0% for younger adults) and more clean (85.0% vs 55.0% for younger adults). Again, no sex of adult effects emerged among the girls' attributes.

Chi-square analyses were performed to compare percentages of girls and boys making specific attributions. Boys were significantly more likely than girls to view the younger adults, both male and female, as clean, glad, healthy, physically attractive and good (all $ps < .05$). Boys were also more likely ($p < .05$) than girls to judge the elderly adults as more helpful. In contrast, girls were far more likely ($p < .05$) than boys to judge the elderly adults as healthy, attractive and good. Again, no differences emerged as a function of sex of adult.

D. DISCUSSION

The results replicate earlier findings (e.g. 4) and suggest that negative attributions concerning elderly persons are evident as early as the preschool years. Moreover sex differences in children's judgments indicate discrepancies in boys' and girls' views of younger and elderly adults. Overall, girls were more positive toward the elderly than were boys. A cogent rationale for this sex-differentiated pattern is somewhat lacking, especially since children's attributions did not vary with the sex of the adults. Additional research which focuses on sex-differentiated patterns of attitudes toward the elderly appears warranted.

Finally, physical attractiveness was related to boys', but not girls' judgments of adults. Boys overwhelmingly saw the younger adults as good-looking and the older adults as "ugly". This indicates that among boys, negative and positive attributes based on the age of adults are closely tied to judgments of attractiveness. Given the powerful nature of the attractiveness stereotype in American culture (3) it would seem crucial in any intervention program designed to enhance attitudes toward the elderly, to emphasize the positive physical aspects of older individuals.

Further research on the link between attitudes toward the elderly and physical attractiveness judgments seems to be an important next step in the area.

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FOOTNOTES

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[2]Half of the children of each sex had a female experimenter, the other half a male experimenter.